

KELVIN THOMSON MP

Speech to Australia Fair Forum

23 October 2007

Hosted by VCOSS at

Wesley Uniting Church 148 Lonsdale St Melbourne

Fairness is a quintessentially Australian concept, and fairness is core Labor business. Unfortunately, over the past ten years the concept of fairness has been under attack on many fronts, possibly all fronts, and the results are clear. At a time when many Australians are doing well, around 2 million children, women and men in Australia live below the poverty line, according to recent analysis based on OECD standards.

Too many children are growing up in homes without a working parent. Australia has the second highest rate of working age households with children, but without an employed adult in the OECD. And there are more than half a million young Australians between 15 and 24 not engaged in either full time work or full time study.

What can we do about this?

1. Fairness begins with the first Australians.

Despite the ambitions of the 1967 Referendum, indigenous people remain the singularly most disadvantaged group in Australia today. Many indigenous Australians still face a lack of adequate health services, over crowded and run down housing, poor access to education and barriers to getting a job.

It is unacceptable that in a country with our prosperity, Australia has one of the widest gaps in life expectancy between indigenous and non-indigenous people in the world.

On the fortieth anniversary of the 1967 Referendum this year, Kevin Rudd committed Labor to a National Objective of closing the 17 year gap in life expectancy between indigenous and non-indigenous Australia, within the next generation. As part of our commitment to close this gap, a Labor government will establish 2 new National Objectives.

- Halving the gap in mortality rates between indigenous and non-indigenous children under the age of five within a decade, and
- Halving the gap in reading, writing, and numeracy achievement within a decade.

This must begin with the generation of indigenous children being born now, focussing on the critical years from birth to eight. The first stage of Labor's plan to close the gap has three component parts;

- Child and maternal health services
- Early development and parenting support, and
- Literacy and numeracy in the early years.

Labor proposes an investment of \$260 million over four years to form the basis of a serious, long term commitment to indigenous children's health and early development.

2. Fairness starts in early childhood.

The early years are critically important in overcoming disadvantage. International evidence points to the benefits of high quality early interventions. That's why Labor believes that all Australian children should have a right to access high quality early childhood education. Federal Labor has committed to providing 15 hours of fun, play-based learning a week to all 4 year olds, delivered by a qualified teacher.

Labor will also help children transition to school by providing \$32.5 million over five years to roll out the Home Interaction Program nationally, in partnership with the Brotherhood of St Laurence. The Program will support up to 8,000 children in communities where they are at risk of falling behind. The two year program for 3-5 year olds provides for home tutors, books and associated educational resources to help parents get their children ready for school.

3. Fairness in the education system.

The single most important thing we can do for our children is to give them a quality education. That is why Labor will invest \$16.9 million to the National Roll Out of the Australian Early Development Index. This index is a check list of children's development – covering five key areas – conducted by a teacher during the first year of school.

Our education system must provide all Australian children with the fundamental literacy and numeracy skills to help them succeed. Labor's National Action Plan on literacy and numeracy will focus on schools, teachers and parents, targeting additional assistance where it's needed most. Labor's education revolution will increase our investment and raise the quality and standards of education at every level, whether it's early childhood, primary schools, secondary schools, vocational education and training, on the job training or universities.

4. Fairness in the health system

A strong universally accessible public health system is a fundamental part of any civilised society. Good health services are critical to individuals' and the community's well being. Labor has a \$2 billion National Health and Hospitals Reform Plan to improve Australia's health system and ensure better health services for patients. As part of our Plan, Labor will invest \$220 million in establishing GP Super Clinics in local communities – bolstering front line health care for Australian families.

Labor will also establish a new Commonwealth Dental Health Program. Our first instalment on this Plan is \$290 million to fund up to 1 million additional dental consultations for Australians needing dental treatment.

5. Fairness in the workplace

There can be no clearer indication of the Howard Government's lack of commitment to fairness than its abolition of the right to take action by workers who have been unfairly dismissed from their workplace. Labor's new Industrial Relations Policy *Forward with Fairness* will restore fairness and flexibility to the workplace, underpinned by 10 National Minimum Standards, a modern Award System and the right to collectively bargain.

Employment security is the key to personal and social well being, to stable relationships and family life and overcoming poverty. Labor is committed to maximising the opportunity for Australians to be employed in secure, high wage, high skilled jobs, by building a strong economy beyond the mining boom.

6. Fairness at home

Every Australian has the right to secure, affordable housing. Low income and disadvantaged Australians who rely on social housing or emergency accommodation have seen available places diminish because of a lack of Government investment. There is a disconnection between our nation's current economic prosperity and the housing reality for many Australians.

As part of our plan to tackle poverty, Labor will establish a National Rental Affordability Scheme that will help create 50,000 new affordable rental properties across Australia. It will cost \$603 million over its first five years. Institutional investors, such as Superannuation Funds, will be offered Tax Credits for up to 10 years on the condition they rent the newly built homes to households that meet an income test, and charge them rent at 20% below the market rate for the area.

7. Fairness for the elderly

A surplus of over 3,000 aged care beds in 1996 has turned into a shortfall of over 2,700 beds at the end of last year. Labor would spend \$158 million over the next five years to create up to 2,000 transition care beds for older Australians now waiting in hospitals for aged care places. We would also make available \$300 million of loans at zero real interest rates to aged care providers to make up to 2500 permanent aged care beds available sooner.

8. Social inclusion

To address entrenched social disadvantage Government must work effectively with the non-government sector and business through philanthropy, social ventures and other structures to deliver targeted interventions at the community level. Labor will create a National Social Inclusion Board made up of community champions to provide the government with advice on what communities need most. Australians living in the margins of our community are often not heard. They need a strong voice for their needs to be recognised and addressed. This role often falls to community, church and other non-profit groups. They need to be able to speak up for those without a voice, free from fear of penalty from Government. Federal Labor is committed to restoring independence, and the right to advocate, to the centre of the relationship between government and the community based sector.

9. Fairness to future generations

Our future prosperity is threatened by global warming caused by this generation's massive pumping of carbon into the atmosphere. We need to act to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, through support for international action by ratifying the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change, and through domestic action, which puts a price on carbon with an emissions trading scheme and sets a serious target for emission reductions – 60% by 2050 – and through increasing the Renewable Energy Target.

Al Gore has said this is no longer a scientific issue, it is a moral issue, and he is dead right. This is the issue about which future generations will look us in the eye and say – what did you do about global warming? It is without doubt a fundamental test of our commitment to fairness.

Kelvin Thomson MP
Federal Member for Wills